



Western Washington University
Western CEDAR

WWU Honors Program Senior Projects

WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship

Winter 2019

She Is: A Poetry Collection

Emma Braun

Western Washington University, braune@wwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Braun, Emma, "She Is: A Poetry Collection" (2019). *WWU Honors Program Senior Projects*. 115.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/115

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in WWU Honors Program Senior Projects by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

SHE IS

A Poetry Collection

Emma Braun

2019

Artist Statement

The title of the collection, *She Is*, comes from a line which appears repeated in several of the poems. The repetition of “she is” emphasizes the centrality of the theme of identity to the collection as a whole. Grammatically, I like it because it feels like a fragment. She is what? What is she? We don’t know. But it’s not a fragment. It has a subject and a verb. It’s a complete sentence. *She is*. She just *is*. She exists and she is. This is, in a sense, the “meaning” of the collection. It is about identity — identity formation, loss of identity, and identity re-formation.

The collection moves in something of an arc. When I was organizing the poems, I put them into three categories:

1. anger, grief, and questions
2. processing
3. acceptance and softness

Some of the early poems are about trauma and are very angry. *Noname* was written in anger. The later poems, like *sweet* and *For you, my dear*, are soft and gentle. The prose poems like *Forest Spirit* and *Arrhythmia* are about love. It’s the most basic poetry topic of all, but those poems came from very a vulnerable and sincere place.

In compiling the collection, I noticed certain themes and motifs emerging in my writing. The themes of identity, the body, loss, trauma, and sexual assault figure heavily in this collection. Those are themes I am aware that I work with often in my writing, but seeing all these poems side-by-side, it was striking how interconnected they all were, though they were written over the span of more than a year.

As a warning, a lot of these poems do include references to sexual abuse, though there are no graphic depictions of sexual assault. A long-term partner sexually abused me over a period of time and, in the time since that relationship ended, I have used poetry to process what happened to me and the way the abuse affected me and my relationship to intimacy and my body. The later poems in the collection are about acceptance and, in a way, rebirth. They are about ending the cycle of trauma and coming out of it gentle, loving, and trusting.

Throughout the collection, I play with elements of craft like slant rhyme, enjambment, extended metaphor, and the format of prose poetry. I wrote these poems at various points in my poetry education when I was in different stages of confidence with my abilities. In revisiting and revising them, I have seen how my style and voice have developed and solidified. These are pieces I am proud of and into which I put a great deal of work, time, and emotion. I hope you enjoy them.

Alarm

rose thorns in briary abundance
beat back bandits thieving marauding princes
prick hands rough and gentle alike because
softness is a weapon in its own right

sleep is not her curse her curse awaits
beyond the walls of thorns more
sinister the shadows pace seeking
opportunity when invitation is inconvenient
because chivalry is merely a disguise

do not be there when she wakes do not
lean over her as she dreams do not
watch her while she waits
let her sleep in peace and she
will wake when she
is ready

Noname

You stole oceans from me
Two years of devotions
Eroding the cliff-face
To dance beneath waves
Graves for sea-foam
De-form my body

Your charming alarming
Words out of cans
Take teeth to my flesh
Mistake metal for bone
Behind wind-chapped lips I forget
Why I let this happen

Fear inconsistency
Fear insincerity
Relentless fingers
Religion of the tides
Stolen the rolling
Of breath straight from my thighs

At least he didn't hit you.
At least you didn't hit me.

Remember the dull burn as
Salt-water drowns in my lungs
In the wake of a hurricane
Footprints wash from sands and

You earned this shame
You earned your name
When you stole mine from me.

Last Will and Testament

1. my father's bedtime stories and the feeling of water carrying me away
2. my grandmother's tissue paper hands and two gold wedding bands on a silver chain
3. my aunt's wrinkles like rivers digging through canyons

I am haunted by very particular ghosts.

Like Dickinson, I like to imagine that a fly buzzed, but it didn't. There was a silence when the breathing stopped. A hospital silence. The kind that lives in a soap bubble too beautiful to break, bordered by the bustle of the living and the shuffle of the dead. Had I blinked, I might have missed it. But as my uncle closed his father's eyes, I couldn't tear mine away. I had watched a soul leave that body, and when I kissed the forehead, the chill of bone beneath bloodless skin, I felt its absence.

My inheritance comes in many forms:

4. my green thumb
5. my hair
6. my depression
7. my nose

But whose eyes?

Of Silence Without Answers

Into the warmth of his body, I ask it. Into the chill of the window I leave open an inch at night to chase away dreams and stale air. Into the space in between. I ask it.

"Are we lovers?"

I don't know what he would say, if I asked aloud instead of through closed lips, pressed to the endless skin of the place where his shoulder meets his neck.

Are we lovers?

The Boiling Frog

Everyone knows that if
you put a frog into a pot
of boiling water she
will hop right back out and into
her safe cool bog but if
you put a frog into a pot
and bring the water to a boil the frog
will not notice until
it is
too
late

The Frog lay back and thought of grocery shopping
onions potatoes curry powder olive oil
so she could pretend to be bored instead of
eggs spinach bell pepper (if on sale) garlic
hurting and once this frog fell asleep
with your hand between her legs and
she felt guilty embarrassed but now
she wishes she could be that far
removed from her body because she
didn't notice she was being boiled until
it was
too
late

The Frog lowered herself into a hot bath and hoped
the water and bath salts would boil away the
outer layer of slimy dirty skin but
it only hurt and she waited and waited until the
bubbles melted until
she melted until
it was
too
late

A Small Reminder

I stopped mattering when you started thinking of *no* as an obstacle to circumnavigate.
And you were tricky about it. A modern day Odysseus.

Remember: he was a pirate at best.

You used persistence instead of force. Crafty fingers instead of fists. Which is why the
bruises only began to blossom months later.

You're quick to dodge the blame, but remember: I gave you years, and in the end, you
left me only with an empty bed and the space to stretch my cramped legs.

Song of the Fat Girl

Fat round chickadee perches on a tree
against cloudless spring singing
two notes *fee bee fee bee*
chickadee chickadee chickadeedeede
black cap mad cap because
who listens to the fat girl singing?

Fat round chickadee waits to see
who will see me
chickadee chickadee chickadeedeede
singing *fee bee fee bee*
and who will ever listen who will
listen to the fat girl singing?

Fat round chickadee wait for me
shout *fee bee fee bee*
chickadee chickadee chickadeedeede
just wait little bird just wait because
because I will listen
I will listen to the fat girl singing!

Dark Room

Thank God Mama doesn't know what a slut I am, I write in my journal that night. I wear the dress she says is too short, the one she didn't let me wear to Christmas two years ago. I wear the makeup she says I don't need and the heels she doesn't know I own. I drunkenly cling to the arm of a man I have not (yet) slept with. Someone hands me a cigarette and I take a drag without thinking.

The first Thanksgiving my mother spent away from home, she spent with strangers. They passed around a joint in the back of a VW bus and my mother said *no thank you* each time and passed it along. Last Thanksgiving, she watched me with narrowed eyes as I poured myself a conservative glass of white wine.

I am immortalized in the strip of photobooth snapshots. I barely recognize myself on the glossy paper, smiling in the moments before I black out and, I am told, cry for an hour at the bar. This is the night I text a boy too many times, step in a pothole and sprain my ankle, and am given a great deal of advice I will not follow.

Each photo is a cigarette my mother never smoked and each is more incriminating than the last.

scratch

body itches for its former form
 scar tissue marks where skin stretched
 to hide where insides grew
 the inside of it
 itching
 tearing at itself desperate
 ghosts of calluses on fingertips
 ghost of muscle memory built over years
 they itch
 longing to feel steelbound strings
 just
 once
 more
 face peeling pulled taught scraped
 beneath fingernails
 molting into molten
 bathwater
 reveal expanses of self
 revel in the tearing

Lady Moonlight

Skin as delicate as a late summer blackberry, the blood beneath as midnight black — I
 am awake. Give me the questions to the answers I carry. Empty my mind of meaningless
 fears. Illuminate the scars on my knees and thighs. The hand I hold is icy but mine is
 warm. Give his heart a reason to beat harder. His blood is black like mine.

No More

Sun warms
my neck, the world
breathes and
caresses my skin.

The chickadees and juncos
chirp, morningsoft,
to one another, crowding
at the feeder, stuffing
their round bodies full
of seeds.

Sprouts peek through
dead leaf matter, gravel,
soon to be bright
trumpeting daffodils, shouting
yellow, growing
green, proud
ruffled collars.

The sky is bluer than
pods of whales,
seaweed grasping ankles,
the feeling of floating
on dry land, the clouds
like seafoam cresting
the mountaintops, raindrops
are teardrops are leaves.

A bug trundles
up the slope, disappearing
into the breach.

My mother speaks through tears
and fear, a soft
fear of a loss
not yet lost.

A hundred miles away,
my grandmother loses her
memory— mind — body

— life.

I don't need help.

She needs electrolytes
and supervision, someone
to find her slippers, to
make her eat, someone
to pick her up when she falls.

What she needs
is my grandfather returned
from the dead to accompany
her through these days.

She wears the wedding rings
on a chain around
her neck, hers
fitting concentric inside his, his
body curled around hers, hers
wasting away, slowly,
slowly
until she is —

For you, my dear

Tonight, we dine on soup and wine and only the finest salad greens.
 I'll make you daisy chains and paper airplanes and play a sweet, sweet tune.
 The forest spirits are dirty liars, the trees all eaten up by fires —
 Those smoky ghosts, they shout, they boast of 'better times' and 'smarter rhymes.'
 As they search the embers, remember, December is not the coldest month.
 April's winds blow away the ash where Springtime gates await,
 Among pomegranate groves and October snows and our quiet, private home.
 But you, my dear, are warm right here, in the gentle grasp of the Earth.
 Hell hath no fury quite like me in the event of supper, interrupted.

Forest Spirit

There is earth in my fingerprints, soaked into my skin. I taste it on my lips. She has left
 her mark on me, in the mud she smeared on my face, my neck. Where her hands
 touched me, she left her mark. Long after I have washed the dirt from my skin, I will feel
 it there. And long after I have begun missing her, I will leave my mark, the earth still
 living in my fingerprints, on someone else.

Bear and Unbear

Psalm of acceptance,
 my body is a cathedral
 in which I must learn to pray.
 Blush the yellow lemons
 and the green of an apple
 while I re-learn which hymns to sing.
 My blood is not wine,
 my flesh will not rise,
 there is no yeast in these fingers of mine.
 Why, after such failed loves as I have loved,
 Why can't I love this unbearable thing?

Arrhythmia

Cold concrete under bare feet, he beckons me towards him. The cinder on the end of his cigarette quavers in the breeze. There are no stars. I remain at arm's length. Inside, the music is muffled by the sliding glass door, slid shut. The grass is damp under my feet as I step forward under the clouds, illuminated from below by streetlights. I hear his breathing behind me. I hear his heartbeat. I know the way it stutters and thumps sometimes. I know the way it races. "Come back inside." Smoke coats his voice like a cough waiting in his throat. I turn. He holds out a hand. I know it will be warm. I know the creases and the softness of the scar tissue on his index finger. I go to him.

sweet

kiss the moon goodnight
 send me into sleep
 so I can dream
 — on my bed of pineneedles
 and licorice ferns —
 of riflshots
 the snapping neck
 of a falling tree —
 the birds like tears in the sky
 watch winter inhale the forest
 watch bears sleep in their beds
 lavender in twilight
 sticky snouts sugar encrusted
 honeybees smelling of foxgloves
 fauns on quaking legs uncertain knees
 watch squirrels bury nuts
 they are sure to forget —
 handfuls of huckleberries
 stain bloodblack lips
 stomachfull of questions
 like caterpillars they hunger
 for answers which grow on trees

but no trees which grow here

Life Cycle, or the Space Between Birth and the End

leathery baby grows in the ground —
skin stretches over fibrous flesh
roots reach for water
and, when leathery hands pluck,
fresh and wailing
from sunwarmed dirt
she finds herself

— bloated
heavy —
grown full of lost potential — before
she can produce leathery hands of her own, she is
chosen for consumption by
those louder and lovelier
than she

and is, instead, lovingly and lavishly
scrubbed
— raw and naked —
she will not be fooled by
fingernails like trowels digging —
and cleansing, and shedding
her leathery skin as she is

bathed and boiled slowly, she is
paralyzed, she is
pliable, she is
allowed to cry until she is
smooth and softening and
so
so soft